

## Johnny Cash: Haunting past the grave

by Peter Stone Brown

It is now almost six and a half years since Johnny Cash left the planet, and somehow, not surprisingly he still remains a vital force, not only as a singer, but as an inspiration, an inspiration that goes far beyond music. Cash was an American giant, and American is important because in many ways his life as well as his legend mirrored America, the good and the bad.

For most of his career, Cash was considered a country-western singer, and for quite a while he was certainly part of Nashville's royalty. That's where you'd find him in record stores, and of course he was from the country, growing up on a farm in Arkansas. But Cash didn't really sing the typical Nashville honky-tonk songs crafted around catchy hook lines, while many of the themes of his songs echoed those of prototypical country songs, and while he sang plenty of cowboy ballads, he wasn't really western either. Since he started at Sun Records in Memphis, with several other rockabilly legends, he's often considered rockabilly, but he didn't rock in the way that Carl Perkins or Eddy Cochran did. In many ways, Cash was actually the ultimate folksinger, with a folksinger's sense of tradition. But he was way too tough and wicked to fit the stereotypical image of a '60s folksinger. So he was a combination of all of the above, but as he wrote about Bob Dylan, he was "lots of other things."

I always knew who Johnny Cash was. As a real little kid, I heard "I Walk The Line," on the radio and I have some foggy memory of kids singing some kid's parody in the driveways behind the row houses where I grew up. In 1963 it was impossible not to hear "Ring Of Fire." But I wasn't listening to country radio then, and "Ring Of Fire" was a rare crossover to Top 40 radio. The folk DJ's didn't play him either. However Cash songs started appearing on albums by such folksingers as Ian & Sylvia and Joan Baez. In 1964, Cash appeared on the cover of *Sing Out!* (the folksong magazine), which included an article by singer-songwriter Peter La Farge. Cash had just recorded *Bitter Tears*, an entire and at the time controversial album of songs about the plight of the American Indian, many of them written by La Farge. The previous summer, Cash appeared at the Newport Folk Festival.

Fast forward a few years to 1968. I was slowly and cautiously starting to listen to country music. One of the first albums I bought was *Live At Folsom Prison*. I thought it was okay, but then one day the song "Folsom Prison Blues" came into my head and wouldn't leave. I

couldn't stop listening to the album after that, and many other Cash albums would eventually follow. In the early winter of 1969, word got around there was going to be a documentary on Cash on N.E.T., (National Educational Television, the predecessor to PBS). Word also got around that Bob Dylan was going to be on the show. Unless one was lucky enough to go to the Woody Guthrie Memorial Concert at Carnegie Hall, this was the first time Dylan fans had a chance to see Dylan following the motorcycle accident. I was living in New York City at the time. A bunch of people huddled in someone's apartment around a little black and white TV. The documentary was actually quite good, exploring Cash's life in detail, every aspect. Somewhere in the middle, there was Cash and Dylan facing each other in a recording studio, microphones between them. The familiar Johnny Cash boom chicka boom beat started, and Cash sang the first verse to Dylan's "One Two Many Mornings." Then Dylan, chewing gum, with fairly short hair and a scraggly beard, took the second verse, except his voice was totally different. It was low and smooth, with hints of a croon. To say the least everyone in the room was somewhat dumbfounded, and for days after any Bob Dylan fan who saw that show, spent a lot of time wondering, what was *that*? The answer came several weeks later when *Nashville Skyline* was released. That June Dylan appeared on the premiere of *The Johnny Cash Show* on ABC TV. Around the same time the documentary, *A Man And His Music* was released as a film. I went to a theater in Times Square and sat through it twice. The TV show made Johnny Cash more than a country star. He was a star period.

Finally in 1976 I saw Johnny Cash in concert at the Temple Music Festival in the suburbs of Philly. Back then the major country singers all had "shows," which included the opening acts, and often a comic. Johnny Cash was no exception. The Johnny Cash show included the Statler Brothers, the Carter Family and Johnny Cash, and of course June Carter and the Tennessee Three, and the Tennessee Trumpets who played on two songs. I was pretty impressed that Cash traveled with two trumpet players who played on two songs. The Tennessee Three were really the Tennessee four with Earle Poole Ball on piano, and Perkins would also sit on various songs. Unlike a lot of country singers at the time, Cash was hip to the advantages of a good sound system, and the sound was perfect. He played two Martin D-45's, with a fixed capo on different frets, switching only when he changed keys. His guitars weren't miked, but you could hear them clearly above the band. When he did what was at the time his current hit, "One Piece At A Time," about a guy who worked at a Cadillac factory and for years stole parts to build a car, a screen appeared behind Cash with a film of the car.

In the mid-1980s, Columbia Records dropped Johnny Cash. It was shocking news and a clear indicator that record companies were no longer being run by people who cared about music. In the summer of 1990, Cash returned to the Philly area at a small theater. The show was smaller, no Statler Brothers, no Carl Perkins, and he now had an upright bass player. I saw Cash three more times in the '90s, at the Tribute to Bob Dylan at Madison Square Garden, at South By Southwest in Austin, Texas, where Cash delivered the keynote address and also sang, concurrent with the release of his first American recording with Rick Rubin and again in Philly in 1995. At the show his voice seemed, deeper, richer and stronger than I'd ever heard it. Two years later it was announced he was sick.

I was never that huge a fan of his work with Rick Rubin. The first album was great for the sparseness of it, the second which added a few more instruments, I also liked. After that, it was never full albums, but selected songs. At times it felt like some songs were picked simply in order to attract a younger audience. I often found myself missing the Tennessee Three, even if they did have the same sound on every song. There was something about it that worked. As Cash got sicker and his voice weaker, it was often too sad, even heartbreaking to hear him. It was like the Johnny Cash death watch on record.

Over the years, I'd realized how brilliant Cash was both as a singer and as a songwriter. I'd learned many of Cash's songs and played them often. As a performer I'd learned when you're playing in a bar and you want to get the crowd's attention, a Johnny Cash song will usually do the trick, no matter where you are.

A few days after Johnny Cash died, we had an online hoot at a Bob Dylan group I belong to, Small Talk At The Wall. An online hoot is when you use a voice chat to play music instead of talk. Most of the performers who played the hoots, including the person who started them at this site were huge Johnny Cash fans. The hoots included all kinds of music from the Carter Family and Leadbelly to the Who and David Bowie. The Johnny Cash memorial hoot went on for hours from somewhere around 8 or 9 at night to four in the morning. Maybe a couple of songs like "Folsom Prison Blues" and "Big River" were sung a couple of times, but other than that there were few repeats. And if everyone wasn't exhausted, it would have gone on for several more hours. A similar thing happened at a tribute show benefit here in Philly, and probably the same thing happened hundreds of times all over the country and probably the world. That's just a small indication of how huge Johnny Cash's song catalog was, and also what an influence he had on people.

And so it was with mixed feelings on what would have been Cash's 78<sup>th</sup> birthday, I celebrated by buying what is final album, *American VI: Ain't No Grave*.

I ended up liking it. Even though his voice is clearly weak, he still manages to convey passion and deep conviction. While on one level, it's kind of a strange combination of songs, but actually quite a few country standards, a couple of folk standards, and a couple of songs that cross the line between the two, it all fits together. More important, they seem to be songs he wanted to sing, and you can hear that as well as feel it in the performance. Beyond the occasional waver in his voice, there's a fierce determination, that he wanted it on record, as a final statement that he did these songs.

In doing so, he adds new levels of meaning to songs that have long been familiar. One of Tom Paxton's earliest songs, "Can't Help But Wonder Where I've Bound," was always this sort of nice, rambling folksong, pleasant but not significant. Cash turns it into something else entirely, as if he lived and lived hard every word.

Ed McCurdy's, "Last Night I Had the Strangest Dream," an anti-war song that was played at innumerable folk concerts from the beginning of the '50s through the mid-'60s, and that Cash had recorded on his *Live At Madison Square Garden* album in 1969, is done here, much slower, much sadder, almost prayer-like.

Kristofferson's "For The Good Times," a huge hit for Ray Price is equally dramatic, as is "I Don't Hurt Anymore," a big hit for Hank Snow. And again it's not just the circumstances under which these songs were recorded, it's the sound in Cash's voice as he sings them. These may not be the definitive versions of any of these songs, but on this album, Cash makes them his own. Most of the songs on this album whether the one's I've already mentioned or "Cool Water" or "A Satisfied Mind," I've known for decades, for most of my life and they meant something else. But on this album, Cash's particular genius is, he makes them all mean something different, all in the light of that he knows he's not going to be around to sing them again, resulting in giving all these songs a new dimension. And it's sad, it's startling, and incredibly emotionally moving all at the same time.

Rick Rubin's production for the most part is on the mark. On the opening traditional song, "Ain't No Grave Can Hold My Body Down," the foot stomp rhythm, which almost sounds like Marley's chains (from Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, at first seemed unnecessary, contrived hokey on first listen, except it works. Go back and listen to

most of Cash's studio albums on Columbia and you'll find plenty of hokey production, some he may have wanted and some he probably winced at. Different songs and different touches to the songs hit you in various ways with each listen, which to me is the mark of a good album. There are times the acoustic guitar overdubs, seem a little too sweet, and at other times they don't. The album seems built around Cash's final original, "I Corinthians 15:55." Cash's handwritten lyrics are the small accompanying booklet. Throughout the album, in the production, the songs, the sequence of the songs, though it lets you down gently and sadly with "Aloha Oe," there's the overwhelming feeling is, what of course the listener already knows, this is it, this is the final statement. And all these years later it hits and it hits hard.

Whether this album will have the lasting impact of Cash's greatest work doesn't matter, and time will tell. Either way, it's still a powerful album. Will someone be singing "I Corinthians 15:55" 20 years from now or 50 years from now the way people sing "Folsom Prison Blues, or "I Still Miss Someone," or "Big River" 50 years after they were written, also doesn't matter.

To me Cash was always his most poetic when he wasn't trying to be poetic, as in these lines from "Big River": *Won't you bat it down by Baton Rouge River Queen Rollin' On/That that woman on down to New Orleans, New Orleans.*

For that song and many others, and many reasons including this album and yes, lots of other things, Johnny Cash, even though he's not here, still lives on, and that's what does matter.